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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000592

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
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P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY  
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OVP FOR HMUSTAFA  
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NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT  
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: VICE PRESIDENT BIDEN MEETS MARCH 14  
LEADERS

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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[¶1.](#) (C) Meeting with visiting Vice President Joe Biden, senior March 14 leaders thanked the United States for its continuing strong support for Lebanese sovereignty and institutions, especially the Lebanese Armed Forces. They welcomed U.S. efforts to stem the flow of weapons to Hizballah and said internal Lebanese dialogue about Hizballah's arms would continue. The Vice President outlined four steps the United States might take to weaken Hizballah: continue support for the Lebanese Armed Forces, seek to exploit signs of Syrian discomfort with Iran, look for opportunities to weaken Iran's support for Hizballah, and urge Israel to take steps to improve its relations with Lebanon. The Lebanese guests welcomed the Vice President's ideas and expressions of support to strengthen the Lebanese state.

[¶2.](#) (C) March 14 leaders acknowledged that their coalition represented disparate, sometimes feuding parts, but declared that their shared experiences of assassinations and common values held the group together. On the upcoming parliamentary election, they asserted that the political mood was beginning to change in favor of March 14. They cited the need for U.S. assistance in solving regional issues to help Lebanon, saying they could handle the work to gain political success domestically. End summary.

[¶3.](#) (SBU) During his May 22 visit to Beirut, Vice President Joe Biden met with March 14 coalition leaders Saad Hariri (Future), Walid Jumblatt (PSP), Samir Geagea (Lebanese Forces), Amine Gemayel (Kataeb), Nayla Mouawad (MP and former minister), Boutros Harb (MP and former minister), and Dory Chamoun (National Liberal Party), for tea at the Mouawad residence in the Beirut suburb of Brasilia. On the U.S. side, the Ambassador, National Security Advisor to the Vice President Antony Blinken, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Joseph McMillan, Senior Advisor to the Vice President for the Middle East and South Asia Herro Mustafa, National Security Council Director for Syria, Lebanon and North Africa Meaghen McDermott, and Embassy notetaker attended the meeting.

## STALWART SUPPORT

14. (C) The Vice President reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to Lebanese independence and sovereignty. Lebanon was intentionally his first and only stop in the Middle East, Biden noted, to illustrate to the world that the United States believed a strong Lebanese state was key to broader regional peace. A Middle East peace settlement was difficult to picture, Biden told the guests, with a fractured Lebanese state. A strong Lebanese army was critical to enable a strong Lebanese state to maintain sovereignty over all its land. The March 14 leaders thanked the Vice President for the strong U.S. support to Lebanon, and affirmed the key role that U.S. assistance and political support played in strengthening the Lebanese state.

15. (C) The Vice President reaffirmed that the U.S. would not deal with Syria at Lebanon's expense. He noted, however, that while the United States did not back any particular political party, it would be difficult to continue the same level of strong U.S. support to the Lebanese police, army, and state institutions if Hizballah dominated the June 7 elections.

## ELECTIONS: CREATE A NEW BLOCKING THIRD FOR THE PRESIDENT

16. (C) Expressing his desire for a March 14 election victory, Hariri focused on government formation following elections.

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March 14, if the coalition won a majority on June 7, would propose a "blocking third" of cabinet ministers for the president, as an alternative to the "blocking third" demanded by opposition Hizballah and Christian leader Michel Aoun. Hariri explained, however, that a presidential "blocking third" would need support from the U.S. and the Arab world. (Note: Hariri also stressed this presidential "veto power" in a separate pull-aside with the Vice President. Under this scenario, President Sleiman would nominate a "swing number" of four or five cabinet members in the next government, including key portfolios such as Defense, Interior, and Justice. This way, neither majority nor opposition would be able to block government decisions; President Sleiman's cabinet "bloc" would be able to prevail. Hariri described this as a "veto within the veto." See paras 16-17. End note.)

17. (C) March 14 leaders differed on whether Nasrallah's speeches had provided any electoral boost for March 14. Mouawad assessed that everyone had "gone a bit too far" in recent speeches and increased political rhetoric. Harb and Mouawad opined that the political mood in Lebanon was changing in March 14's favor, partly because of negative reaction to the speeches. For his part, Jumblatt said the impact of Nasrallah's speech on the Christian population was still unclear.

18. (C) Noting the unlikely collection of figures that comprised the March 14 coalition, Mouawad pointed to the shared values, such as democracy and independence, among them. She noted that the "main cement" that united the various March 14 leaders assembled in the room, however, was the common legacy of martyrdom. Each had lost a member of his/her family in sacrifice for Lebanon. Lebanon relied on the United States, Mouawad said, to champion these shared values. Gemayel also noted the shared values and principles among March 14 leaders.

## FACTORS AT PLAY FOR LEBANON: MILITARY SUPPORT, SYRIA, IRAN, ISRAEL

¶9. (C) The Vice President described four actions that the U.S. hoped to pursue in order to weaken Hizballah. First, continue to provide military equipment to the Lebanese Army. This was a necessary defensive measure, although not the solution by itself, Biden said. Second, continue to urge our allies in Europe to join us in pressuring Syria to stop support to Hizballah. This had potential because the Syrians seemed increasingly uncomfortable with Iran, the Vice President said. Third, exploit fractures within the Iranian leadership through U.S. engagement with Tehran. The Vice President noted that Iran's interest in dialogue with the U.S. might encourage Tehran to reduce support for Hizballah. Fourth, encourage the Israeli government to take steps to help March 14.

¶10. (C) Lebanese Forces head Samir Geagea agreed that Hizballah's arms were "the real problem" in Lebanon. Nasrallah's May 15 and 18 speeches indicated that Hizballah viewed as a natural right its ability to "go o the streets" if the group felt challenged or dsapproved of any action taken against it. Lebanon would "lose everything" if the group resorted again to armed violence. MP Boutros Harb said that Nasrallah's recent speeches had been a "provocation" and had exposed the "ugly face" of the resistance.

¶11. (C) Druze leader Walid Jumblatt stressed the importance of dialogue as the only way to address Hizballah's arms. Noting that Shebaa Farms was still officially considered Syrian territory, he argued that the United Nations must ratify Shebaa as Lebanese land to move the process of disarming Hizballah forward.

¶12. (C) Sunni leader Saad Hariri argued that the enemy of any army is a militia. Lebanon needed a strong security force to eventually confront Hizballah. In the meantime, Hariri noted that dialogue with the group would continue -- most likely in the form of the National Dialogue on the defense strategy --

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while the institution of the Lebanese Army grew stronger.

¶13. (C) On Syria engagement, Hariri noted the need for a "plan B" so U.S.-Syrian dialogue would not continue solely for the sake of dialogue. He stressed that the Syrians needed to understand that the United States was serious in its unwillingness to accept current Syrian behavior. Hariri noted that all regional players would benefit from a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement. The problem of Hizballah's arms had international aspects, such as the group's relationship with Syria and Iran, that required U.S. assistance, Geagea opined. Harb welcomed U.S. efforts to curb the flow of arms through Syria to Hizballah. Jumblatt suggested that Turkey and Saudi Arabia also should engage Damascus. He supported continuing the normalization of relations between Lebanon and its Syrian neighbor.

#### REDUCING ROLE OF REGIONAL ACTORS

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¶14. (C) The Vice President noted, and all participants agreed, that the path to peace in the Middle East centered on Jerusalem. For Jumblatt, Harb, Mouawad, Geagea, and Gemayel, the Palestinian-Israeli issue was the biggest issue for Lebanon. Biden opined that while Lebanon did not need to be the first country to sit at a negotiation table with Israel, Beirut must eventually open dialogue with Tel Aviv. Eventual negotiations with Israel would require a solid and stable government in Beirut able to maintain sovereignty and control over the country, Biden reiterated. Harb stressed that a solution to the Palestinian issue must exclude "tawteen," the resettlement of Palestinians, in Lebanon.

¶15. (C) Chamoun told the Vice President that in order to make Lebanon a valid player in the peace process, the United States needed to help diminish the influence of regional leaders, such as Iran, Syria, and Israel, on the Lebanese

domestic situation. Gemayel thanked Biden for the U.S. role in pressuring Syria to remove its troops from Lebanon in 2005, but remarked that the Syrians were still active in the country. Jumblatt also expressed concern about Israel, asking the Vice President to send a message to the Israelis to "stop meddling in Lebanon." Mentioning the recent spate of arrests of suspected Israeli spies in Lebanon, Jumblatt said Israel could cause civil strife with its intelligence operations on Lebanese soil.

PULL-ASIDE WITH SAAD HARIRI

¶16. (C) In a short pull-aside with the Vice President, Saad Hariri focused on the importance of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. He also declared that both Syria and Iran were "using engagement" to buy time, hoping they would be able to control Lebanon through their proxies in the Lebanese Parliament. Hariri voiced confidence that March 14 would return as the majority in the next Parliament. The government would be a national unity government, he predicted, bringing in all major political parties, but would not give Hizballah the power of the veto (blocking minority). It would be best if President Sleiman was given the "veto," or by distributing the blocking minority between March 8 and the President. This way, said Hariri, President Sleiman would have a "veto on the veto."

¶17. (C) Hizballah might well refuse such a scenario, however, said Hariri, which could then create a vacuum in Lebanon's executive branch. Hizballah might then attempt to repeat the scenario of 2007-2008, which led to the May 7, 2008 Hizballah invasion of Beirut. Such a scenario could only be averted through concerted Arab and international pressure on Syria. If March 14 heard that such Arab and international pressure was not possible, Hariri continued, this would mean that Lebanese were being asked to "turn over their country" to Syria and Iran. If this is the case, he said, "we can not be expected to pay the price of defending democracy, moderation and peace" while the world had decided to allow Iran a free hand in Lebanon. In the unlikely event March 8 wins a majority in parliament, Hariri concluded, Iran

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and Syria would take over the country "through constitutional means." How would the world deal with such a development, he wondered aloud. We have heard worrying statements from France, the U.K. and others that "nothing will change and that they will continue to deal normally with the elected government, even if it is Hizballah-led. "What is Plan B?" he queried. The Vice President strongly and repeatedly voiced U.S. support for Lebanon's sovereignty and independence.

¶18. (U) The Office of the Vice President has cleared this message.

SISON